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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 003492

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E, DRL FOR SJOSEPH, AND INR/B
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [ET](#)
SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: INTER-PARTY TALKS CONTINUE WITH
OPPOSITION ON THE OUTSIDE

REF: ADDIS ABAB 2110 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR DONALD YAMAMOTO FOR REASON 1.4 (D).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: More than five months since wrapping up negotiations on a revised electoral law and election of a new National Election Board, the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Movement (EPRDF) party has finally restarted the inter-party dialogue with opposition parties. However, after the three most significant opposition parties walked out of the previous round of talks, the EPRDF has privately and publicly insisted that these parties formally apologize before being allowed back to the negotiating table. Leaders of the opposition parties have told Post that they will not apologize and will forego participation in dialogue on the final two points of the agreed six-point agenda--press law reform and political party financing. Indeed, the EPRDF has gone on without these groups, and on November 19, began discussions on a revised press law with the remaining two pseudo-opposition groups. Post will continue working to encourage both sides to reconsider their stubborn positions and to reengage with one another. Failing that, we will work to establish a forum outside the established Parliamentary inter-party talks in order to address other important issues, to which both sides have expressed potential willingness.
END SUMMARY.

AGENDA COMPREHENSIVE, BUT TALKS START STRONG

12. (SBU) Following the May 2005 elections and subsequent domestic controversy, the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party agreed to engage with major opposition groups to address a number of pertinent issues, including parliamentary rules of procedure, rule of law, electoral and press law reform, and political party financing (reftel). In addition to key EPRDF figures' participation in these talks, party leaders from the Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP), the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF), Oromo Federal Democratic Movement (OFDM) and United Ethiopian Democratic Party (UEDP-Medhin) were invited, representing all major opposition parties. While an encouraging sign that the EPRDF was willing to host these talks and address these issues, progress has been slow. After more than two years, the

inter-party forum has completed work on parliamentary rules of procedure, rule of law and a new electoral law, which included nomination of a new National Election Board (NEB), a flash point from the previous elections.

13. (SBU) Unfortunately, discussions over the electoral law, perhaps the most controversial of all the agreed agenda items, proved to be the issue that undid the inter-party cooperation. The three major opposition parties (CUDP, UEDF, and OFDM) all had disagreements with EPRDF proposals and felt that their input was being vetoed out of hand by the EPRDF. After several frustrating meetings, these parties walked out of the talks on the electoral law, saying they would rejoin once the forum began on another topic. Though angered by the opposition's unwillingness to stay at the negotiating table, the EPRDF continued discussions with UEDP-Medhin, as well as a breakaway faction of the CUDP led by Ayele Chamisso.

(NOTE: Chamisso is an Addis Ababa city councilmember-elect who had been one of the original founders of the CUDP. However, internal power struggles led to his split with CUDP leader Temesgen Zewdie. Since that time, Chamisso, who has neither the support of any sitting MPs nor those leaders recently released from prison, has drifted closer to the EPRDF in an seeming attempt to gain political relevance. END NOTE.) Though the EPRDF claims publicly to be actively working with "opposition" members, both of these groups are widely viewed as opposition in name only) each having little support among voters and being perceived as too close to the government. Talks on electoral law concluded with parliament ratifying the law and approving the PM's nomination for a new NEB in June, despite opposition MPs votes against both steps.

THE SUMMER OF DISCONTENT

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14. (SBU) After June, continuation of the inter-party dialogue was delayed largely due to the GoE's preliminary work on a proposed new press law. Post had engaged with the GoE in 2006 to provide an international best practice study regarding press laws, followed by retention of an international expert consultant to help draft a proposal specific for Ethiopia in cooperation with GoE officials. Following submission of the draft law, negotiations between the GoE and the expert (monitored by Post) continued throughout the summer of 2007. Since the discussions ended in September 2007, the GoE has been working to revise the expert's final draft into a proposed law. The GoE completed this work and issued invitations to participating opposition parties to recommence the inter-party dialogue on November 19.

15. (SBU) Though each of the three major opposition parties insisted that they would like to rejoin the talks after walking out of the electoral law negotiations, it now appears that none will be invited. Since the last round of talks concluded, the EPRDF has demanded that the opposition leaders apologize for having walked out and to commit to staying engaged on the final two topics - press law and political party financing. Though opposition leaders have informally and formally communicated to the GoE that they regret having not been part of the end of the electoral law discussions, as well as committing to remaining part of the process, none are willing to tell the EPRDF they are "sorry." Despite Post's repeated efforts to broker a settlement, both sides remain firm. The GoE insists on a verbal apology to the negotiating group, while opposition leaders maintain they have more to lose by apologizing. Opposition leaders (likely rightfully) fear that the EPRDF will publicize this apology, thus shaming the leaders in public and in the eyes of their constituents. EPRDF leaders themselves acknowledged that in Ethiopian culture apologizing makes one look like a "sissy." In a meeting with opposition leaders on November 23, they told Ambassador that they have resigned themselves to the fact

that they will not be part of joint talks and will not seek any involvement in talks on press law or political party finance.

PRIDE TRUMPS PROGRESS - POST SEEKS MIDDLE GROUND

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Despite concerted efforts by the Ambassador and Post, the obstacles to the inter-party talks on issues critical for Ethiopia's democratization--particularly following the setbacks after the May 2005 elections--have been disappointing and frustrating. The agreed-upon agenda items addressed many of the opposition's primary concerns before the elections. Though there was some notable progress on the first agenda items of parliamentary rules of procedure and rule of law, it would have been very beneficial in advancing Ethiopia's slow march toward democratization had both the EPRDF and opposition parties reached agreement on the key areas of electoral and press law reform. Unfortunately, the ruling party appears committed to exacting a political gain at the expense of the opposition, rather than engaging and working seriously with representatives of roughly one-third of the electorate on strengthening democratic practices and institutions. In the face of such an obstinate interlocutor unwilling to accommodate opposition considerations, the opposition is left with two options: 1) remain engaged in processes over which they yield no substantive influence--effectively giving credibility to the ruling party's agenda; or 2) leave the process entirely. Unless the EPRDF (and NEB) demonstrate greater accommodation of the opposition in the coming campaign season, the opposition may face a similar dilemma. An opposition boycott of the local elections would deliver a resounding blow to Ethiopia's democratization process. Currently, however, opposition leaders are taking the moral high road and have stated that they will participate in the local elections.

¶7. (C) Though some remnants of opposition party representation remain engaged in talks, these parties are mostly irrelevant to opposition supporters, and generally do not represent views counter to the EPRDF's. The GoE undoubtedly knows that having buy-in from more vocal opposition groups would have been politically beneficial by

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quieting voter discontent. However, both the EPRDF's and opposition's horns remain locked, with neither side willing to budge and face public embarrassment for having given in. With no apparent chance of convincing either side to relent, Post is focused on creating an alternative forum in which both sides can sit down to discuss other critical issues outside these formal agenda items. Specifically, in the run up to local elections to be held in April (septel), and the many controversial issues already surrounding how these will be held, a forum in which both sides can address concerns will be essential) an issue which both sides fortunately agree upon. END COMMENT
YAMAMOTO